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Responding to the Tennessee Pre-K Study

By: Linda K. Smith, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development

A new study of the Tennessee Pre-K program came out this week. Researchers at Vanderbilt University have been conducting an evaluation of the program for a number of years and the latest study reflects findings on children at the end of the third grade. Not surprising, the study shows that improved outcomes gained during the Pre-K year are not sustained by the end of the third grade. These results are similar to the Head Start Impact Study and are not particularly unique. They may be troubling, but not for the reasons one might think. Can – or should – we assume the cause of “fade out” is attributed to just the Pre-K program? What else should we consider?

First, fade out is not well understood. There are several things that should be considered. Do the gains fade out because of the quality of the Pre-K program or because of the quality of K thru Grade 3? Is the fade out the result of K-3 teachers focusing on those children who have had no formal early learning experiences – sometimes referred to as “catch-up” – or is the dosage of the Pre-K experience (one year vs. two years or half-day vs. full-day) something that needs to be better understood?

Second, what do we really know about the quality of the Pre-K experiences overall? The quality of early learning programs has not been studied closely. In the years since the Head Start Impact Study was conducted in 2002, much has been done to improve the quality of Head Start. For example, significant improvements have been made in teacher qualifications, curriculum, classroom assessment and overall monitoring. The impact of these and other improvements have yet to be studied.

Third, how a child performs on certain scales, such as literacy and mathematics, are important, but alone are not the only measure of how a child is doing. It is well understood that the social-emotional development of children is at the core of their ability to learn academic skills and function in society. The Vanderbilt Study acknowledges that children arrive at Kindergarten socially and emotionally better equipped to learn, but what happens after that? As anyone who has ever taught kindergartners will attest, skills such as self-regulation may be the biggest indicators of how a child will perform later in life. What happens to this aspect of development during the K thru Grade 3 period deserves more research to not only better understand the Tennessee study but better approaches to the birth to five years as a whole.

Fourth, another question that is still largely unstudied is how the quality of the learning experiences in the schools the children attend impacts fade out and why. Do the gains fade out because there is no alignment between the Pre-K and elementary school approaches to learning or curriculum? If so, how do we improve the alignment between two systems that are so different? According to the recent NAS Study on the Early Childhood Workforce “proficient learning in each domain of develop and early learning is facilitated when standards, curricula, assessment and teaching practices are aligned with each other and across ages and grade levels, based on rigorous research and evaluation and implemented with fidelity”. There is much we don’t know about alignment in each of these areas.

Fifth, are there more sustainable gains if children are provided rich early learning experiences earlier, beginning at birth, as the neuroscience suggests? If, as research demonstrates, by the age of three, poor children have heard 30 million words less than their economically advantaged peers, then the time to start is much earlier than Pre-K for four-year-olds.

One last thought – the Parents. Early childhood programs, especially those conducted in community-based programs, have much more engagement with parents. In part because of their children's age, parents must deliver and pick them up directly, which provides for almost daily communication with teachers. The importance of this cannot be over-estimated but has not been studied extensively. Parent communication and involvement changes dramatically once a child enters school.

As my friend and colleague, Walter Gilliam PhD, Director of the Yale Child Study Center, once said, "if you eat a good dinner and go to bed full, it should still come as no surprise that you are hungry the next day". Maybe, just maybe, the fade out occurs because we are focusing too narrowly on just one "meal" or one year of a child's life. What happens during the years before and the years after Pre-K are just as critical as the experiences during that single year of the child's life.